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# Choosing America's Story: How the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction Has Defined the Way Americans Think about America and Themselves

Rebecca Kathryn Chambers  
*Bucknell University*, [rkc011@bucknell.edu](mailto:rkc011@bucknell.edu)

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CHOOSING AMERICA'S STORY:  
HOW THE PULITZER PRIZE FOR FICTION HAS DEFINED THE  
WAY AMERICANS THINK ABOUT AMERICA AND THEMSELVES

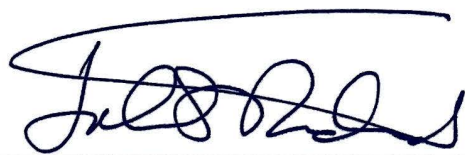
by

Rebecca Chambers

A Thesis Submitted to the  
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Approved by:

  
Thesis Advisor: Anthony Stewart  
Thesis Second-Reader: John Rickard  
Chair, Department of English: Alf Siewers

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## Introduction

This past October, Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” (nobelprize.org). Many people were surprised by the choice, as Dylan is not normally seen as a producer of great works of literature, but rather as a successful singer-songwriter. Many throughout the literary world criticized the choice. Anna North of *The New York Times* bluntly begins her article “Bob Dylan does not deserve the Nobel Prize in Literature.” While she notes he is an accomplished lyricist and musician, she also says, “when the Nobel committee gives the literature prize to a musician, it misses the opportunity to honor a writer,” which is important because “awarding the Nobel to a novelist or a poet is a way of affirming that fiction and poetry still matter, that they are crucial human endeavors worthy of international recognition.” Other critics felt that it disrespected poets and poetry, as well as omitted authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, and Haruki Murakami. The selection of Dylan over any of these aforementioned writers reflects directly upon the value of the prize as it questions what great literature is. Ignoring these writers and applauding Dylan’s accomplishments instead tells the writers their works contain the same amount of literary value as a popular song. To some, awarding such a prestigious prize diminishes the importance of literary works and also the prestige of the prize itself.

The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction has struggled with the same tension throughout its 100-year history. “In literature, the Pulitzer has become America’s version of the Nobel Prize” (Bates 11), and it has given the prize to great writers such as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, but instead of winning for *A Farewell to Arms* or *Absalom*,

*Absalom*, respectively, they won for their less well-known works such as *The Old Man and the Sea* (Hemingway) and *The Reivers* and *A Fable* (Faulkner). It has given an award to Toni Morrison for *Beloved*, but overlooked celebrated writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos. W. J. Stuckey, author of *The Pulitzer Prize Novels: A Critical Backward Look*, and James. F English, author of *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, have criticized the prize for its choices based on the Best-Seller List rather than critical approval. This brings into question the importance of the prize itself and the works it has deemed worthy enough to win. Many of the Pulitzer winning books can be described as “a literary triumph, power, the juggernaut of success; and something more: the remaining prestige of literature, a prestige that has almost nothing to do any longer with the intrinsic virtue or efficacy” of the work (Duff & Mitchell 230). The books that win are often commercial successes, seen as the pinnacle of literary achievement, but their intrinsic literary value may not play such a strong role in the reasons for their success. Some of this tension between popular novels and literary masterpieces may be part of the story of the United States of America that the Pulitzer wants to tell. Popular books that portray the United States in a certain light may be privileged over a very well written book that goes against that vision. The prize’s story of the United States is prescribed through its criteria, explained below.

Little has been done before to look at the way the books reflect the United States and the multitude of stories therein. W.J. Stuckey is the only person to have attempted a comprehensive study of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and his work is more of a comparison piece, judging the books against each other and looking for overarching themes in the narratives. He conducted his study on the books between 1918 and 1976.

This thesis builds upon Stuckey's assessment and instead of looking at every book in its turn, focuses on a select few and how they exemplify certain trends within the prize.

The early Pulitzer Prize for Novels/Fiction has, since its inception in 1918 until 1968, existed at the intersection of nostalgia and critique. Popularity and ideology also contribute to the larger American cultural scene, but nostalgia and critique are the two main currents running through the books awarded the prize. This thesis explores these two currents and their interplay with popularity and ideology for the first 50 years of the prize.

*The Age of Innocence* (1921)<sup>1</sup>, *Gone with the Wind* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1961), and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1968) are all exemplary of the Pulitzer Prize because they exist right at the intersection of nostalgia and critique. *The Age of Innocence* and *Gone with the Wind* are more focused on the nostalgia and romance aspects of the prize. Romance and nostalgia feed the public's imagination as it "is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream" and reflects on times gone by, making the genre popular (Frye 186). Because romance and nostalgia have existed forever, they feed into the established forms of ideology within the United States: "In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance" (Frye 186). *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* fall more on the critique side of the prize. Critique is popular because it reflects "a problem that seems to the Pulitzer authorities to be a burning public issue" and because of the prize's stature as the American literary award to have, it is able to criticize American ideology (Stuckey 256). The Pulitzer then can be seen as an approved form of

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to year awarded the prize, not year of publication

critique. The two main currents of nostalgia and critique collide in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1968), which marks the 50th anniversary of the first Pulitzer Prize for Fiction being awarded, in an example of American storytelling in which there is a struggle within the novel over which American story to tell: the nostalgic or the critical. These two parallel narratives of nostalgia and critique are always vying for attention in the Pulitzer Prize; one year nostalgia may win out, the next year it may be critique.

What makes the books chosen for this thesis different from the more conventional Pulitzer Prize-winning books, of which this writer has read approximately 50, is their exemplification of the currents of nostalgia and critique, as well as their interplay with popularity, especially in popular culture, and ideology. The books fit inside both the ideological framework of the prize, which can be rather confining, and well as within the ideological framework of the American cultural scene that the Pulitzer has no control over, because the Pulitzer is only a small segment of the dominant American story. Ideology is “the system of the ideas and representation which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (Althusser 158). Ideology stems from the classroom, the family, the church, and the government, among other venues, essentially anything that can influence someone’s way of viewing the world. The Pulitzer Prize cannot control American culture, but it can control which book is awarded the prize. Its influence is felt in the well-documented increase in the sales of the novels it deems worthy for the prize (English 330). The early Pulitzer tells a story where the American dream is still alive and well, where this myth is rarely criticized. Its canon includes stories where a man can come from nothing and become the richest man in the city (*So Big* 1925), where a wife can think about cheating on her husband but will never act on those impulses (*Early*



*Autumn* 1927), and where the American frontier is still a place of fearlessness and pioneer spirit (*The Travels of Jamie McPheeters* 1959). There is a tension between life as experienced in the United States of America and what the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction suggests to readers that the narrative is. The reality of the twentieth century was very far from what the Pulitzer would like us to believe about the United States.

The beginning of the prize was ruled by a very prescriptive set of criteria. From 1917 to 1928, the prize was to be “awarded annually for the American novel published during the year which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American Life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood” (Stuckey 7). *The Age of Innocence* was awarded the prize under these strict constraints because it was the least controversial of the books eligible for the award that year (Stuckey 40). In 1928, the criteria became less prescriptive: “For the American novel published during the year, preferably one which shall best present the whole atmosphere of American life” (Stuckey 9). The change in criteria is influential because the books awarded during those years are very different from the ones from the first 10 years. They became a little more diverse; the first book set outside the United States (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* 1928), the first book about an African American community (*Scarlett Sister Mary* 1929), and the first book about a Native American (*Laughing Boy* 1930) all won the prize during these few years. Then in 1931, the criteria changed once again; the prize was now “For the best novel by an American author published during the year, preferably dealing with American life” (Stuckey 10). The criteria loosened and became less prescriptive. This set of criteria lasted until 1947, when it once again shifted to accommodate fiction that was not necessarily in novel form, and *Tales of the South Pacific*, a collection of short stories,

won the prize (Stuckey 11). The remaining four books this thesis focuses on were all awarded the prize within the criteria that only specify they must be written by an American and that they preferably deals with American life.

Popularity also implies accordance with the dominant ideology of the United States of America. In order to be popular, something usually has to fit within an established form. The books this thesis examines are those that have found a balance between being nostalgic or critical and also popular as well; however, popularity can be arbitrary and cannot always be accounted for. The shifts in public taste dictate what will ultimately be popular. The nostalgic books were often awarded the prize. As for the books of critique, if a book is too critical, it will not be chosen for the prize because it will not be popular enough. For example, *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis was “commonly regarded as a vicious attack on small-town culture, or lack of culture” and so *The Age of Innocence* was awarded the prize instead because “clearly, *Main Street* was the more controversial book” (Stuckey 40). In its early years, the Pulitzer usually reflected ideas in the American psyche that were popular enough to be accepted in literature. The early Pulitzer was a conservative prize that had to wait until the United States had shifted enough that people would want to read a novel about the issues discussed therein. English addresses the tendency to pick more conservative books when he says, “with this many selectors in the mix, their overwhelmingly journalistic backgrounds inclining them to approach literary greatness through the optics of visibility and respectability, the Pulitzer has tended to land on the safe, consensus choice” (English 151). The backgrounds of the selectors lent the choices a conservative bent. In a mocking essay in *The New Republic*, Malcolm Cowley writes,

We members of the Advisory Board ... are afraid of sex, afraid of ideas, afraid of blood, revolution, and coarse language ... What they really imply is a guarantee to the American public that the two chosen books and the chosen play have nothing in them to shatter conventions or shake the state, nothing to drive the stock market up or down or interrupt the sleep of virgins. (Stuckey 250)

The prize often errs on the side of caution when it comes to awarding a book with potentially disruptive ideas. Books like *Native Son* (1940), with its story of an African-American youth living in poverty, and *Invisible Man* (1952) about a man whose color renders him invisible, were not awarded the prize. It is noteworthy that *Invisible Man* was awarded the National Book Award, while the Pulitzer Prize was given to Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*.

The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction became not only a symbol of a book's importance, but also of American culture in the mid-twentieth century. Because of the prize's prestige, "The implication seems to be that these books constitute an important body of American literature with which all educated people should be familiar" (Stuckey 248). The Pulitzer should be the one book people should pick up each year, but the prizewinner must still be accessible to achieve its aim of crafting the story of the United States of America. The story that the Pulitzer is purporting to tell needs this popularity; you can't influence a nation if no one is reading or understanding the books chosen.

The popularity of important issues comes into play with the dichotomy between *Gone with the Wind* (1937) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1961). Here the prize goes from a book, *Gone with the Wind*, that is unapologetically nostalgic about the lifestyle built upon

the backs of slaves to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a book that may be read as addressing past wrongs through its story. In 1937, Scarlett O'Hara and her adventures throughout the Civil War were enough to hold the audience's attention and her views on slavery and African Americans were not considered offensive enough to stop it from being one of the most popular stories of the twentieth century. In fact, it only took three years for the story to make it from the printer's press to the big screen, effectively widening the audience that those ideas were reaching. In contrast, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and its picturesque, white, progressive family represent a shift in the national consciousness. Enough has changed in the nation where a story about racism, where all the main characters are white, was popular because it played into something so pervasive that the American people couldn't look away: the Civil Rights Movement. This was both the dominant topic of the day and what the Pulitzer Prize reader reflected as important.

It is important that the criteria for the prize have changed over time. The Pulitzer prize is a living thing; it is constantly evolving and changing to fit the greater context with which it is saturated. If it stays stagnant, it loses touch with what is popular, and if it loses this, it loses its relevance.

## Chapter 1: American Nostalgia

One of the main themes of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction is nostalgia, and one way nostalgia is conveyed is through the mode of romance. *Gone with the Wind* and *The Age of Innocence* have remained hallmarks of the romance and nostalgia aspect of the Pulitzer Prize, while winners such as *Early Autumn* (1927) and *Years of Grace* (1931) have not. Their popularity can be attributed to the style of writing and the appeal to a time when things were thought to be better, such as the antebellum South or New York City before in its heyday in the mid-1800's.

Romance is defined as the “nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream” and “the perennially childlike quality of romance is marked by its extraordinary persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space” (Frye 186). This genre divides everything into good versus evil and black versus white, fitting right into the Pulitzer Prize’s moralizing that stems from the strict criteria of the early prize. The idea of nostalgia is when one yearns for a bygone time that always looks better when remembered than it did while it was happening. This rise to nostalgia and sentimentality is addressed by S.D. Chrostowska in “Consumed by Nostalgia?” who says that there has been a “transformation to nostalgic experience over the last century, particularly in the wake of two world wars” (52). While the United States was changing during the twentieth century, some Americans were yearning for a return to the idealized past. Nostalgia also stands for a “social emotion” that “may facilitate continuity between past and present selves” (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge 306). According to this thesis, a social connectedness between the American past and present is part of what

the Pulitzer Prize stands for.

The nostalgic element of the prize was so popular, in fact, that most of the early prizewinners are centered on that idea. For example, *The Able McLaughlins* (1924) focuses on idyllic farm life and its influence on the characters' morality. Additionally, *The Caine Mutiny* (1952) is, at first glance, a novel about a Navy warship during WWII and the mutiny that occurs there, but an equally prominent plot line is the main character Willy Keith's involvement with May Wynn, a girl below his social station and the problems that causes both of them. Another, *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters* (1959), seems to love the thrill of westward expansion and the pioneer spirit: "Ranged alongside me at the counter, or bar, were a rough-hewn pair with hearts of gold, the prototypes of fighting men who have made our great nation what it is" (81-82). *Gone with the Wind* and *The Age of Innocence* are able to combine an epic love story with their ability to harken back to an earlier time. This is the lens turned on 1870s New York City and Europe in *The Age of Innocence* and on the antebellum South in *Gone with the Wind*.

*The Age of Innocence* wins in 1921, during the transition period between World War I and the Roaring Twenties. It looks back on 1870s New York City, one untroubled by creatures such as the flapper, where respectability still reigns and a moral compass is the most important attribute a man can have. Wharton herself writes about the United States post-WWI in the preface, "All that I thought American in the true sense is gone, and I see nothing but vainglory, crassness, and total ignorance - which of course is the core of the whole evil" (iv). She projects some of these feelings back into the 1870s, saying, "The day was past when that sort of thing was possible: the country was in the possession of the bosses and the emigrant, and the decent people had to fall back on sport or culture"

(81). That “sort of thing” is politics; no respectable man should consider involving himself in political affairs when the whole foundation of American manhood and manners has been erased by the so-called “bosses and the emigrants.” The novel is already nostalgic for a bygone time. Wharton does not limit herself to only bemoaning the state of American politics; she uses sumptuous descriptions of the 1870s to create this nostalgic atmosphere. William Lyons Phelps, the reviewer from *The New York Times Book Review*, notes, “I do not remember when I have read a work of fiction that gives the reader so vivid an idea of the furnishing and illuminating of rooms in fashionable houses as one will find in *The Age of Innocence*.” When describing the house at Skuytercliff, Wharton writes, “It was a large square wooden structure, with tongue and grooved walls painted pale green and white, a Corinthian portico, and fluted pilasters between the windows” (84). Wharton continues to impress upon her reader the elaborate elegance of the age. “The formal and elaborate dinner parties in New York in the seventies are described here with a gusto that the steady undercurrent of irony quite fails to conceal; there were epicures in those days who sallied from their Fifth Avenue mausoleums not to talk, but to dine” (Phelps). In an effort to save Countess Olenska’s reputation, the van der Luydens give a dinner and “the dinner was a somewhat formidable business. Dining with the van der Luydens was at best no light matter, and dining there with a Duke who was their cousin was almost a religious solemnity” (39). It is a lifestyle that looks monumentally intimidating, but also enthralling.

*The Age of Innocence* is a novel with two levels of nostalgia: the first comes through the reader and their nostalgia for the New York of 1870 with its magnificent way of life; the second is the characters’ yearning for the ways of Europe. They come face to face

with the dichotomy between the two continents when Ellen Olenska, the Welland cousin, who has been living in Europe married to a Polish count, arrives in New York. Only Ellen, who has spent a majority of her time in Europe, seems to be unimpressed by the Continent. She says to Newland, “It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it into a copy of another country” (155). But the characters who have spent the majority of their time in the United States feel differently. There is always an intimation that Europe is on better footing and is what the United States should strive to be. Winsett, in a conversation with Newland, says, “Culture! Yes - if we had it! But there are just a few local patches, dying out here and there for lack of- well, hoeing and cross-fertilizing: the last remnants of the old European tradition that your forebears brought with them” (81). The novel is rather obviously nostalgic for the cultural atmosphere of Europe and the cultivation that it provides.

*Gone with the Wind* also effectively creates the feeling of nostalgia. The novel spans the decade surrounding the Civil War, 1860-1870, and thus portrays both the antebellum and postbellum South. This shift, seen through Scarlett O’Hara’s eyes, seems tragic. Scarlett revels in the antebellum South; it is a world she knows how to succeed in. While Scarlett is a very strong character who does not let the Civil War and its outcomes affect her, she often reflects back fondly on her life before 1861. Mitchell utilizes a lot of the same tools as Wharton does; the descriptions of the parties and the Southern Belle lifestyle are enough to create a wistful atmosphere around the book:

Although born to the ease of plantation life, waited on hand and foot since infancy, the faces of the three [Tarleton boys] on the porch were neither slack nor soft. They had the vigor and alertness of country people who



have spent all their lives in the open and troubled their heads very little with dull things in books. Life in the north Georgia county of Clayton was still new and, according to the standards of Augusta, Savannah, and Charleston, a little crude. The more sedate and older sections of the South looked down their noses at the up-country Georgians, but here in north Georgia, a lack of the niceties of classical education carried no shame, provided a man was smart in the things that mattered, And raising good cotton, riding well, shooting straight, dancing lightly, squiring the ladies with elegance and carrying one's liquor like a gentleman were the things that mattered. (26)

Early on in the book, Mitchell paints a picture of men who are rugged and elegant, gritty but well mannered. She upholds values that are notably traditional and rooted in the world of Scarlett O'Hara.

Scarlett is not the only character in the novel who is nostalgic for the antebellum South. Melanie Wilkes, Scarlett's friend and eventual defender, feels much more at home before the war than after. She writes in a letter to Scarlett,

I am not afraid of danger or capture or wounds or even death, if death must come, but I do fear that once war is over, we will never get back to the old times. And I belong in those old times. I do not belong in this mad present of killing and I fear I will not fit into any future, try though I may. Nor will you, my dear, for you and I are of the same blood. I do not know what the future will bring, but it cannot be as beautiful or as satisfying as the past. (212)

Melanie is assured that there will never be another world where she will be as successful as she was in pre-war Georgia and she classes Scarlett as the same kind of spirit. Melanie is ultimately correct about her future, as she does not survive long after the war; however, she is wrong about Scarlett's ability to survive and adapt. Although Scarlett would always like to return to the past where it all was easier, she has learned how to adapt best she can to her new situation and succeed in it.

The book is also nostalgic for the American Dream. It sees the early 1800s as a time an immigrant could come into the country and turn himself from nothing into something. Tara is founded by Gerald O'Hara, who "had come to America from Ireland when he was twenty-one" (60). He comes as a relatively uneducated, unprivileged immigrant and finds his way into Southern society amidst his brothers who had come over earlier and begun to thrive in the trade business. However,

He felt keenly, as his brothers did not, the social stigma attached to those 'in trade.' Gerald wanted to be a planter. With the deep hunger of an Irishman who has been a tenant on the lands his people once had owned and hunted, he wanted to see his own acres stretching green before his eyes. With a ruthless singleness of purpose, he desired his own house, his own plantation, his own hordes, his own slaves. (63)

And Gerald works hard and perseveres and achieves his dream through any means necessary; he wins his land in a poker game. Gerald is an opportunist and takes a chance for advancement where he sees one. And through perseverance and some family support from his brothers, Gerald is able to make his dream of owning a plantation a reality. "Whenever Gerald galloped around the bend in the road and saw his own roof rising

through green branches, his heart swelled with pride as though each sight of it were the first sight. He had done it all, little, hard-headed, blustering Gerald” (66). O’Hara does exactly what the Pulitzer Prize appears to privilege; he comes, he sees an opportunity, and through hard work (even though he wins the land in a poker game), he turns that land into a prosperous plantation to be proud of.

Gerald O’Hara is not the only one who revels in life at Tara and Scarlett is not the only character who indulges in nostalgic remembering. Mitchell’s treatment of the African American people in her story is unfortunate. As one reads through the 1,000 pages Mitchell has assembled, they are invited to see the world and interactions therein through Scarlett’s eyes. The ex-slaves look back on their enslavement and view it in positive terms. Big Sam, an ex-field hand from Tara, ends up North with a Yankee colonel and he is put off by the way he is treated. He says, “‘But all dem Yankee folks, fust time dey meet me, dey call me ‘Mist’ O’Hara.’ An’ dey ast me ter set down wid dem, lak Ah wuz jes’ as good as dey wuz. Well, Ah ain’ nebber set down wid w’ite folks an’ Ah is too ole ter learn. Dey treat me lak Ah jes’ as good as dey wuz, Miss Scarlett”” (726). Big Sam is not comfortable with the idea of being treated on the same level as a white person. The passage suggests that Big Sam believes he was better off under slavery. Mammy expands on this when she talks to Scarlett about being free: “‘Ah is free, Miss Scarlett. You kain sen’ me nowhar Ah doan wanten go. An’ w’en Ah goes back ter Tara, it’s gwine be w’en you goes wid me” (784). Although Mammy has her freedom, she is still devoted to her white family and the loyalty she feels for them would never allow her to abandon them. Furthermore, the white people in the novel continue to perpetuate the idea of the inferiority of the slaves. Frank tells Scarlett “slaves were

neither miserable nor unfortunate. The Negroes were far better off under slavery than they were now under freedom, and if she didn't believe it, just look about her!" (708).

This idea that slavery was actually necessary for African Americans is an unfortunately pervasive thought throughout the first half of the Pulitzer Prize. In *Andersonville* (1956), some of the freed slaves do decide to leave, but their decision is shown in a light that makes them seem gullible and unintelligent, just reinforcing the idea that African Americans were better off under slavery:

Ira Claffey was shocked speechless at the thought of a general abolition of slavery. He imagined hordes of illiterates trooping the highways with no roofs to lie beneath at night, with no one to buy food for them, with no money and without sufficient knowledge to buy sustenance for themselves. Worse than that, he saw them exploited as tools of unscrupulous white men who might fetter them in an industrial slavery in cities, where sun and comfort of wild places would be denied them (Kantor 91).

Here, Claffey is not only concerned about what the freed blacks would do to society, but what society would do to the free blacks. This need to be protected is perpetuated by Ellen O'Hara, Scarlett's mother and a model of Southern womanhood: "'Always remember, dear,'" Ellen had said, 'you are responsible for the moral as well as the physical welfare of the darkies God has instructed to your care. You must realize that they are like children and must be guarded from themselves like children, and you must always set them a good example'" (447). This idea is maintained over and over again, and there are many more incidents of characters from *Gone with the Wind*, as well as

other Pulitzer winners, referring to the ex-slaves as children.

Another indication of the nostalgia current in the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction is the books' reliance on social conventions to structure the plot. The morality aspects of many of the novels stems from the rules enforced by these social structures. *The Age of Innocence* is firmly rooted in convention and conservatism, which rule almost all of the characters' decisions. A review of the book from *The Guardian* in 1920 says, "Convention rather than humanity has conquered impulse." Convention rules the world of 1870s New York; Newland, Ellen, and May are all bound to certain behaviors that they can neither change nor escape from. One of the largest driving forces of convention is the strong, interconnected family network that exists in the story. Newland and Ellen are introduced originally because of Newland's engagement to May. When Ellen arrives in New York City, she arrives friendless and alone. Although Ellen has quite a few family members in the city (she is a cousin of May's), she is not completely accepted because of her eccentric looks, lifestyle, and her inability to fit into the narrow confines of this upper-class society. When Newland first sees Countess Ellen Olenska, she is wearing a "dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp" (5). Through Wharton's description, the reader begins to understand that this is not the fashion of the moment and that Olenska's dress is somewhat *off*. Between her incongruous appearances on the New York social scene and the vicious gossip that trails her everywhere she goes, Newland is inspired to stand up for her:

Newland Archer felt himself impelled to decisive action. The desire to be the first man to enter Mrs. Mingott's box, to proclaim to the waiting world

his engagement to May Welland, and to see her through whatever difficulties her cousin's anomalous situation might involved her in; this impulse had abruptly overruled all scruples and hesitations, and sent him hurrying through the red corridors to the farther side of the house. (9-10)

Newland wants to protect his future wife from the scandal that is now attached to the family in the form of Olenska and he does that by adding his family's cachet to the fight for respectability.

Newland's sister, Janey, questions his dedication to family during an exchange about his decision not to dissuade Countess Olenska from being seen with the wrong crowd. In response to Newland's comment: "I'm not engaged to be married to the Countess Olenska!" Laney responds, "'You're marrying into her family.' 'Oh, family - family!' he jeered. 'Newland - don't you care about Family?' 'Not a brass farthing'" (55). Note the capital F in Family. Wharton emphasizes the structure around which the elite New Yorkers form themselves: Family. Although Newland claims that he not could care less about the ties Family has on him, at the end of the day, he falls back into the typical Pulitzer pattern. He remains faithful to his wife and family and he protects his family's honor and prestige above all else.

Newland and May are not the only ones who feel the pressures of family, that ideological apparatus that is so pervasive throughout so much of life. Scarlett O'Hara also falls prey to its power in *Gone with the Wind*. The entire novel centers on her attachment to her familial estate, Tara, and its survival through the Civil War and the postbellum period. Scarlett ends the novel by saying, "I'll think of it all tomorrow, at Tara. I can stand it then. Tomorrow, I'll think of a way to get him back. After all, tomorrow is

another day” (959). Besides this quote being so exemplary of the attitude so pervasive in Pulitzer winners, it also shows Scarlett’s attachment to her land and her belief that her place in the world is directly linked to her family plantation. After Ashley Wilkes, the man Scarlett believes herself destined to marry, becomes engaged to Melanie Hamilton, Scarlett’s father tells her, “‘Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything,’ he shouted, his thick, short arms making wide gestures of indignation, ‘for ‘tis the only thing in this world that lasts, and don’t you be forgetting it! ‘Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for- worth dying for!’” (55). Scarlett internalizes her father’s message and it continues to rule so many of her decisions throughout the book. Her father’s lesson is given to her in such an unquestionable, straightforward manner that it becomes a rule by which she lives.

Scarlett is also governed by a need to protect certain members of her family and extended family. After Gerald’s horseback riding accident, Scarlett’s life begins to revolve around his care and his recovery: “She had hoped when she first came home that Gerald’s old spirit would revive and he would take command, but in these two weeks that hope had vanished. She knew now that, whether she liked it or not, she had the plantation and all of its people on her two inexperienced hands, for Gerald still sat quietly, like a man in a dream” (415). She steps up and takes upon herself the responsibilities of Tara and all of those who rely on its success. Scarlett is also loyal to her friends; she sees herself as the protector of her friends, especially Melanie. During their flight from Atlanta to Tara, Scarlett does all she can to defend those in her wagon. Near the end of their journey, “Melanie opened her eyes and, seeing Scarlett standing beside her, whispered: ‘Dear - are we home?’ ... ‘Not yet,’ [Scarlett] said, as gently as the constriction of her

throat would permit, ‘but we will be, soon. I’ve just found a cow and soon we’ll have milk for you and the baby’” (384). Even though Melanie does not belong directly to the O’Hara clan, she is a remnant of the society so important to Scarlett. She is important to preserve so Scarlett doesn’t lose her moorings in the rapidly changing world after the Civil War.

The convention of family also imposes specific roles onto the characters of *The Age of Innocence* and *Gone with the Wind*. Both books present two competing versions of femininity, with May Welland and Melanie Wilkes being the conventional ones and Scarlett O’Hara and Countess Ellen Olenska diverging from that conventionality in some significant ways. May and Melanie are conventional for many reasons: they subscribe to the marriage conventions of the times (which are essentially the same), they are sweet, doting wives, and they care for their children greatly. Essentially, they are the perfect models for womanhood in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As Newland, in a fit of anger, thinks, “he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made in the snow” (29). Newland recognizes the myth built around the women; however, he never escapes it and still deeply believes it. May presents to the world such a face of guileless innocence, that even Newland is able to see its carefully cultivated façade, but he is not able to transcend it. Melanie is a little quieter and her goodness possibly more genuine than May’s. After her death late in the novel, Rhett says, “She was the only completely kind person I ever knew” (948). Scarlett agrees in her own way. She thinks, “Melanie had



always been there beside her with a sword in her hand, unobtrusive as her own shadow, loving her, fighting for her with blind passionate loyalty, fighting Yankees, fire, hunger, poverty, public opinion and even her beloved blood kin” (936). May and Melanie are the moral compasses in the novels by which everyone else steers. They are the ones keeping everyone on within the limits of social convention as best as they can.

Scarlett and Ellen, on the other hand, are women whom society watches with a wary eye. “As Stuckey’s survey indicates, Pulitzer Prize novels commonly present fairly stereotypical heroes and heroines caught in an action in which they enact only slightly unconventional gender roles while often personifying quite pressing social issues and moral dilemmas” (Stone 103). Scarlett and Ellen are these characters, but they fall farther along the unconventionality spectrum than many Pulitzer characters. Both have had rocky marriages. In Ellen’s case, she married a man who ended up being a terrible husband and Scarlett married men who provided security for her, but she never loved the first two. They present an unconventional face to the world; earlier in this thesis was an example of Ellen’s unconventional dress and Scarlett continues this tradition with her infamous curtain dress. Scarlett is searching for a way to save her beloved Tara and she needs a new dress to wear to the bank. Unfortunately, the only materials available are the curtains in the drawing room. Although her outfit is unconventional, Scarlett sallies forth with an air of confidence a lesser woman never would have even attempted. Ashley “had never known such gallantry as the gallantry of Scarlett O’Hara going forth to conquer the world in her mother’s velvet curtains and the tail feathers of a rooster” (518).

Scarlett and Ellen represent passion and a will to live, even in unconventional manners. They both embrace experiences that were seen as very scandalous, such as

owning and running a sawmill or living alone in New York City. Both women are also much freer in their romantic relationships than either May or Melanie would ever be. Ellen knowingly gets involved with Newland, an engaged and then married man, and only backs out of the relationship when she finds out that May is pregnant with Newland's child. She chooses a life alone in Paris rather than conforming to the standards and conventions imposed on her by New York City. They are possibly braver women than May and Melanie. Scarlett is a businesswoman in her own right. She owns a sawmill inherited from one of her late husbands and continues to run it through most of the novel. However, one of the most enduring scenes from the novel comes when Scarlett, out of options, tramps through the grounds of Tara, scavenging to find food for the table. "Why was Scarlett O'Hara, the belle of the County, the sheltered pride of Tara, tramping down this rough road almost barefoot... She was born to be pampered and waited upon, and here she was, sick and ragged, driven to hunt for food in the gardens of her neighbors" (405). Scarlett is not afraid to transgress the boundaries of traditional womanhood, such as staying at home and not getting involved with business, and she does it all with the welfare of Tara and the ones she loves in mind.

The men in the novels, Rhett and Newland, do not escape convention either. Newland is held in thrall by the strict rules of New York Society. "He had failed to stop at his club on the way up from the office where he exercised the profession of law in the leisurely manner common to well-to-do New Yorkers of his class" (54). In just one sentence Newland has so many obligations unique to his position in society. He has a club where an appearance is mandatory to keep up a certain status; he has a lackadaisical desk job where it does not matter if he shows up because his degree and job are really all

to show that he is a respectable member of society. Newland is also strictly bound by the social conventions of his time. "Etiquette required that she should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other by her side" (40). While this quote really exemplifies a woman's social role, Newland has to play along. He has to take the initiative and play the game. He does this at the opening scene at the opera as well: "New York was a metropolis, and perfectly aware that in metropolises it was 'not the thing' to arrive early at the opera; and what was or was not 'the thing' played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago" (Wharton 2). He has been born into a long line of men who are confined by arbitrary rules about how to do things and what to do when.

Rhett Butler, on the other hand, is the antithesis of Newland. While Newland seems to relax a little and care less about the rules as the novel goes on, Rhett begins to care more and more about them. Rhett fits into the American ideology of the heroic scalawag, but not the Pulitzer ideology of the moral, self-made man. The United States loves its stories of ill-gotten gains turned into a success story, as exemplified by the Kennedy clan. Rhett typifies this sort of behavior; he makes his money from underground trading during the Civil War, but he decides to become respectable when he realizes that his daughter, Bonnie, needs him to be. Although he marries Scarlett and doesn't seem to care that much about public opinion, as the book goes on, the reader sees him becoming more and more bothered by Scarlett's outlandish behavior. He also becomes an avid politician, rooting for the cause of the Old South. This scalawag with a hidden heart of gold both goes against and agrees with Pulitzer tradition. Rhett redeems himself; as an originally

rebellious spirit, he is broken down by the expectations of society until he begins to conform. But he never completely conforms to societal conventions; they are all dependent upon the impetus of Bonnie. The death of his beloved daughter puts a stop to his civic-minded duties. At that point, he has lost all of his incentive to become an upstanding member of society. For Newland, those restrictions will never be removed; he lives in a world that is intrinsically governed by unspoken rules and regulations that he does not have the strength of will to challenge.

The difference between these novels and their portrayals of social conventions lies in the criteria under which they were awarded the prize. The two novels are set within ten years of each other; *The Age of Innocence* is based in the 1870s while *Gone with the Wind* covers the years from 1860-1870; however, there is a substantial difference in tone and approach when the writers are writing about the same time period and very similar situations. *The Age of Innocence* belongs to the first set of criteria from 1917-1928:

“Awarded annually for the American novel published during the year which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American Life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood” (Stuckey 9). According to these criteria, Newland Archer will never be able to leave his beautiful and moral wife; by doing so, he would not be exhibiting “the highest standard of American manners and manhood.” This also might account for the ending. Even years later, Newland is not be able to desecrate the memory of his beloved May by returning to the woman who almost ruined their marriage. The upper-class world of 1870s New York City of *The Age of Innocence* is much more fitting for that specific set of criteria than 1860s Atlanta, Georgia in *Gone with the Wind*.

When *Gone with the Wind* was awarded the prize, the criteria were: “For the best

novel by an American author published during the year, preferably dealing with American life” (Stuckey 10). All of the moralizing and prescriptive elements have been scrubbed from the prize and while many of those elements persevered anyway, it broadened the possibilities for the award. *Gone with the Wind* is able to win because Rhett and Scarlett do not need to be Newland and May. Their marriage does not have to be a picture of domestic bliss as that of the Archers, even though Ellen posed a stumbling block for their relationship. All Scarlett and Rhett have are stumbling blocks and that is what makes them such an entertaining couple, but not one the earlier Pulitzer Prize would have supported. Their marriage ends in shambles, whereas Newland and May’s ends nicely, forty years later, with May’s death. Rhett and Scarlett also have a lot of feelings in turmoil about each other, but they are not all positive. Scarlett is married three times and even when she is married to Rhett, she keeps waffling back and forth between him and Ashley and only the death of Melanie makes her realize that Rhett is whom she wants to be with. “She had to lose them all to realize that she loved Rhett - loved him because he was strong and unscrupulous, passionate and earthy, like herself” (946). Unfortunately, their marriage ends with Rhett telling her, “My dear, I don’t give a damn” (957). Famously, these are the last words that Rhett speaks to Scarlett in the novel. Compared to the ending of *The Age of Innocence*, where Newland looks back fondly on both his marriage and his aborted affair with Countess Olenska, the Archers seem to have had the better experience.

In addition to the failure of Rhett and Scarlett’s relationship, there is the failure of Newland and Ellen’s. These four characters are able to capture their audience’s imaginations, but they are not able to capture each other’s hearts. Both novels are firmly

within the romance genre and yet neither of the couples that the books' plots center on end up together and the end. Newland and Ellen go their separate ways after May announces her pregnancy. Even after May's death, Newland stays true to her memory, out of respect and love for May. He has the chance to rekindle his relationship with Ellen when he visits Paris with his son, but he decides against it. "'It's more real to me here than if I went up,' he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other" (235). Something about a relationship with Ellen scares Newland. He would rather stay in a land of reality and convention than enter Ellen's world with its looser morals and lawlessness. Newland by this time needs those rules to continue living sanely; he has been trapped in that web for so long that he no longer knows how to function without them.

The romance and nostalgia character of the Pulitzer Prize is such an enduring part of the Pulitzer's trajectory because of its appeal to the basic human needs to love and remember. These two elements are also so intricately intertwined that when one is activated it is easy to tap into the second one. This genre also feeds into the idea of convention and pushing back against it when the need arises, especially for love. *The Age of Innocence* exemplifies the Pulitzer archetype where a moral compass can ultimately stop anything from happening; however, *Gone with the Wind* also takes advantage of the appeal to humanity while showing the actions of an impulsive couple who act on their feelings, often ending in rather disastrous situations for their relationship. This category shows the two sides of human nature at war with each other, and that is what has made it such an important part of the prize.

## Chapter 2: American Critique

The United States of America is, in part, built upon the ability to critique the society in which we live and the government that rules us. James Baldwin writes in his book *Collected Essays*, “I love America more than any other country in the world, and exactly for this reason. I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually (9).” With the First Amendment, the Constitution of the United States of America gives Americans the right to freedom of speech. Authors in the United States are allowed to write books that critique American society and some of these books become popular. Many of the books awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction fall within the nostalgia and romance current discussed in the previous chapter; however, occasionally, a book that is critical of the United States will win. As a pillar of American literary culture, it is expected to engage with some of the pressing issues of the day, preferably in a productive and inoffensive manner (to the dominant reading population: those who have the money and leisure time, such as white middle-to upper-middle class Americans). Two of these novels are *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1961). These books critique different components of the social structure that form the status quo of the United States. This thesis argues that the Pulitzer Prize approaches these critiques relatively conservatively; it waits until the issues have become mainstream and pervasive in popular culture, rather than leading change. Only then is a book that says something critical about the United States of America awarded the Pulitzer.

Relatively few of the books awarded the Pulitzer Prize actually engage with the flawed social systems that exist within the United States. This is especially the case in the

prize's early years. However, this is exactly what *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* do. As *The New York Times Book Review* from 1939 says, *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel about the hardships of the Great Depression, is "as pitiful and angry a novel ever to be written about America." It critiques the American government, banks, money, and humankind in general. It is able to find flaws in many aspects of the American social culture. Steinbeck's novel emphasizes that the myth of the American Dream cannot survive everything. The Joad family wants to work and they move from Oklahoma to California in search of a steady paycheck. But once there, they face a sad and desolate scene; they are by no means the only ones in this story struggling to survive:

Steinbeck does not let America off easy, and students are often startled by the social criticism, perhaps because it challenges their view of their nation. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, America is a chaotic place governed by greed, self-interest, and a relentless hunger for land and money. (Heavilin 303)

There is a stark contrast with so many of the previous prize-winning novels where all one needs to survive, and even thrive, in this country is strength of will and a strong work ethic, such as in *So Big* (1925). It's telling that two novels also published in 1925 are Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, both extremely critical of this American story. These two novels were eligible for the prize in 1926, the year Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, wins. This could point to the prize being overwhelmed with critical novels. All three options ultimately critique the United States in some way. But while a book like *The Great Gatsby* is about the failure of the American Dream, *Arrowsmith* is a novel about the sacrifices necessary to achieve it. Lewis had also been



overlooked for the prize previously for *Main Street* and felt robbed of the prize (Stuckey 58). Some pandering to authors may have come into play when awarding the prize that year.

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, on the other hand, critiques the social structure that allows an innocent man, Tom Robinson, to hang for raping a white woman, a crime he did not commit, all because of his skin color. Frank Lyell of *The New York Times Book Review* writes, “The events connecting the Finches with the Ewell-Robinson lawsuit develop quietly and logically, unifying the plot and dramatizing the author’s levelheaded plea for interracial understanding.” *To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays the prejudices against the African American community and points out the deeply entrenched flaws within society and the justice system in regards to the treatment of African Americans. It pleads for its readers to see the violation and wrongdoing associated with all of the proceedings and to recognize that a solution needs to be found; however, the book does not offer one beyond Scout’s naïve insistence that everyone should be able to get along because they are all people.

It is worth noting that both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* were banned from public libraries and schools for various reasons. In the article “The Reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Oklahoma,” Shockley writes, “the Associated Farmers of Kern County California, denounced the book as ‘obscene sensationalism’ and ‘propaganda in its vilest form,’ the Kansas City Board of Education banned the book from public libraries, and the Library Board of East St. Louis banned it and ordered the librarians to burn the three copies which the library owned” (351). Just like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Grapes of Wrath* “told them something about American society that

they did not want to hear” (Karolides, Burrell, & Kean 483). Furthermore, some of the critiques of *To Kill a Mockingbird* come from *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*. The book was banned in various school districts and even some “Sporadic lawsuits arose. In most cases the complaint against the book was by conservatives who disliked the portrayal of whites” (Karolides, Burrell, & Kean 476). What really affected the readers who disliked the book was that it “continues to have life within the world; its ongoing activities in the realm of censorship show that it is a book which deals with regional moralism” (Karolides, Burrell, & Kean 483). The two books were banned because they presented a facet of the United States that citizens did not want to face.

There are specific circumstances that enable the two books focused on here to be awarded such a conservative prize. Here, the aspects of popularity and ideology highlighted in the introduction have an influence. The aspects of the United States and its society that come under criticism have to be an accepted critique; they have to be part of mainstream culture. For example, John Steinbeck did not publish *The Grapes of Wrath*, with its critique of so many American institutions, until 1940, the year that the United States was able to see evidence of the ending of the Great Depression. Although *The Grapes of Wrath* is published relatively soon after the trauma of the Great Depression, it is still a retrospective novel, allowing Steinbeck to critically examine the causes of the suffering and present them to the American public. The reader can be comforted knowing that the aspects of American policy that caused the Great Depression have been addressed, if not resolved. Because *The Grapes of Wrath* is not published in the midst of the Great Depression, those whom the book criticizes are given some distance from the events.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is published in 1961, at the beginning of the rational attention paid to the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s. The book is explicit in its condemnation of the treatment of Tom Robinson; however, the book still falls within the Pulitzer scope because the critique is given to us through Scout, who is white and eight years old at the time of the trial. Jill May writes in her essay “In Defense of *To Kill a Mockingbird*” that “Scout Finch’s presence as the events’ main observer establishes two codes of honor, that of the child and of the adult” (478). The reader is given adult Scout’s interpretation of her childhood experiences, but these experiences are still very tinged with naivety. The voice that, as the reviewer from *The New York Times Book Review* states, tells the story is “an open, unprejudiced, well-furnished mind of one’s own, showing how Scout manages to decide very early in life that no matter how you try to divide up the human race, there’s really ‘just one kind of folks. Folks’” (Lyell). This perspective makes the critique more powerful because even Scout’s young, Southern indoctrinated perspective can see that the treatment of Robinson is not acceptable. But these more objective views of an eight year old are not harsh and her account buries the lawsuit within other events a child would have deemed important, such as her school play. *To Kill a Mockingbird* also glorifies Atticus Finch and his defense of Robinson, even though he is court appointed. At the end of the trial the courtroom balcony, mostly composed of the African Americans, stands up as a sign of respect for his efforts. Scout says, “I looked around. They were standing. All around us and in the balcony on the opposite wall, the Negroes were getting to their feet” (283). Here, the black community is celebrating the white man for doing his job. When a book that critiques the United States does win the prize, it conventionally critiques in the accepted ways, meaning that it does so in a way that is not offensive to its presumed

readership. The books either deal with events that are behind them or events seen through the eyes of a narrator who is able to make the situation more palatable and less harsh to a mainstream Pulitzer audience.

One of the markers of the critique books of the Pulitzer Prize is their dependence on physical aggression and written rules to structure the story and critique. Whereas, *The Age of Innocence* and *Gone with the Wind* are structured by unwritten social conventions and restrictions imposed by society and the Ideological State Apparatuses, like the family, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are governed by a resistance to the Repressive State Apparatuses, especially when they are being abused. The Repressive State Apparatus, as defined by Althusser, is publicly bound, whereas Ideological State Apparatuses are more centered in the private sphere (Althusser 144): “Repressive [also] suggests that the State Apparatus in question ‘functions by violence’” (Althusser 143). This is exactly how the State Apparatus functions when threatened in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and in *To Kill a Mockingbird*; it resorts to violence through the police, the courts, and even the regular citizens.

When the citizens in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* do not trust the agents of the law to do what needs to be done to maintain the status quo, they take matters into their own hands. *To Kill a Mockingbird* critiques this way of dealing with issues by highlighting the illegality of what is about to be done and the prejudices behind the actions. In the South, this kind of justice in the streets was common and “obtaining justice through the law [was] not as important as the courtroom play in southern trials and that because the courtroom drama seldom [brought] real justice, people condone[d] ‘violence within the community’” (May 480). Despite the already prejudicial courts,

many in the South did not trust them to dispense the correct amount of punishment, and so the community takes it upon themselves to properly handle the situation. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we see this “violence within the community” in multiple places, one of the tensest being the first night Tom spends in jail. Atticus is worried that the public will take it into their own hands to lynch Robinson so he sits outside the jail all night waiting to intercept the mob that is bound to come. Eventually, a mob does form and Scout observes,

It was a summer’s night, but the men were dressed, most of them, in overalls and denim shirts buttoned up to the collars. I thought they must be cold-natured, as their sleeves were unrolled and buttoned at the cuffs. Some wore hats pulled firmly down over their ears. They were sullen-looking, sleepy-eyed men. (204)

Although the reader is only given the scene through Scout’s rather naive narration, there is a hostile and threatening tone underlying the whole interaction. Only through Scout’s innocent misinterpretation of the severity of the event, do Atticus and Tom come out unscathed; she interrupts the lynchers before they are able to complete their mission. *The Grapes of Wrath* is also critical of the law and the Californians’ abuse of it. The Joad family encounters a similar situation when they are staying in the government camp in California. The locals are threatened by the presence of so many migrant workers and take it upon themselves to scare and intimidate them into back to where they came from. One night, the camp hosts a dance and the men staying there use this as a chance to gather and discuss the plight of the worker. One of their look-outs reports “a car with six men parked down by the eucalyptus trees, an’ they’s one with four men up that north-side

road... They got guns. I seen 'em" (341). These men then claim to be sheriffs deputized by the Farmer's Association to keep order among the migrant workers and they attempt to gain entrance to the camp, citing a riot as the reason. Although nothing happens at this specific moment, the threat is still prevalent. Steinbeck's writings are filled with violence or the eminent threat of violence: "Suicides; domestic violence; lynching; botched abortions; fraternal beatings; heroes who boast about knocking people's heads 'plumb to squash' merely a cursory glance at Steinbeck's writing reveals the central presence of violence. Brutal force is never far from the surface of a Steinbeck story" (Mumford 145). Furthermore, "In *Grapes of Wrath*, then, Steinbeck's political commitment hinges upon a presentation of violence as *aberration*. The characters do not rejoice in the perpetration of force. They act because they have to and in constrained ways" (Mumford). They have to participate in the violence against them or they will not survive the Great Depression with their dignity intact. At this time, "America is a place of conflict, violence, and hatred" (Heavilin 304). The scene also highlights the abuses the migrant workers, forced out of their homes due to circumstances out of their control, suffer at the hands of the Californians.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* takes the critique of the law a step further and applies it to the judicial system. The court becomes the central decision-making entity, with the final say on life and death. When Tom Robinson is accused of raping a white woman, few in the town question it. There is no "innocent until proven guilty." Tom is essentially "guilty until proven guilty." There is nothing about the court itself to imply that the proceedings are going to be skewed by prejudices. Judge Taylor is described as "a man learned in the law, and although he seemed to take his job casually, in reality he kept a firm grip on any

proceedings that came before him” (220). The reader is told to trust the judge. In addition, Atticus is represented as a very fair and capable lawyer; his closing speech in the Robinson-Ewell case is very well known. Atticus speaks about the fairness of the court system: “Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal ... A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up ... In the name of God, believe him” (274-5). And yet, the trial is a prime example that “Southern justice through the courts is not a blessing. It is a carnival” (Karolides, Burrell, & Kean 482). Despite a fair judge, a superb defense attorney, and an airtight story, Tom Robinson is still accused of raping Mayella Ewell. The jury still returns the verdict of guilty: “A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson” (282). None of the legal skill in the entire world could have saved Tom at that moment. Reverend Sykes says, “I ain’t never seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man” (279), and once again he is proven correct. The political climate of the 1930s was against Tom ever being successful and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as stated by multiple reviewers, “was a worthwhile interpretation of the South’s existing social structures during the 1930s” (Karolides, Burrell, & Kean 476). Even the supposedly most unprejudiced institution in the United States is restrained by exactly those prejudices; they are, in reality, one of the aforementioned Ideological State Apparatuses, and prejudices can emanate from them. It was impossible for the jury to see beyond Tom’s color to the actual events. What makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* such a powerful story in this American narrative is its clarity; the reader knows for a fact that Tom never raped Mayella Ewell. The injustice of the

situation is so stark that it is almost impossible not to feel outraged by the situation.

The court system, one of the most powerful voices in the United States of America, tells Tom that he is not worthy of, and will never receive, a fair trial because of his skin color. It is of very little surprise that after Tom is sent to prison “he just broke into a blind raving charge at the fence and started climbing over. Right in front of them” (315). The trial forced him to face his position in Southern society, and he decided it was better to die in prison than die at the mob’s hands when he is released from prison. Robinson knows what would happen to him if he when he tries to escape in such a manner. In addition to being imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, Robinson dies a gruesome death. The guards riddle him with bullets and Atticus is right when he says, “Seventeen bullet holes in him. They didn’t have to shoot him that much” (315). Every Repressive State Apparatus: the police, the jail, the court, and even the prison system, lets Tom down. From where he stands, there was no redemption anywhere; his last chance is through Atticus Finch, who, despite his respectability and ability as a lawyer, is not enough to save Tom from his certain death.

Moving beyond the law and the mistreatment of the Joads and Tom Robinson under its sway, *The Grapes of Wrath* critiques money, its corrupting force, and its ties to the banks. In this way, *The Grapes of Wrath* perpetuates one of the tenets of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction: the corrupting force of money and the idea that money will drive people to do inhumane things to other humans. The owners of the land, in order to make more money, come and tell their tenant farmers they are being replaced by a piece of machinery and need to find a new place to live. The book begins with the tractors coming onto the Oklahoman farms right “across the dooryards” (38). The tenant farmers watch



their whole worlds crumble down around them and they can do little, if anything, to stop it. Their worlds are being destroyed for some extra profit for someone else. In interactions with these men, the Joads learn that: “some of the [owners] were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold” (31). This last, ruthless attitude is the one that dominates many of the interactions between the Joads and the wealthy characters throughout the novel. These characters do not care about what happens to the people as long as they continue to prosper. “You’re not to miss the point. It is sledged home in these bursts of indignation, hymns almost, of hate against those ‘who own the things that the people must have’” (Heavilin 49).

Wherever the Joads turn once they arrive in California, the owners of the farms and orchards take advantage of them. The story serves to emphasize “America [as] a place that exploits the labor and the labor market” (Heavilin 303). *The New York Times Book Review* points out that “Their pay is cut from 30 cents an hour, to 25, to 20” (Jack). There is no escape for the Joads from the power of money or the effects of having none.

*The Grapes of Wrath* expands on the corrupting force of money by pulling the banking system into its critique. Steinbeck writes,

Sure, cried the tenant men, but it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That’s what makes it ours-being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it. We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man. Yes, but the banks are only made of men. No, you’re wrong there-quite wrong there.

The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank

hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it. (33)

The novel makes it clear that the banks are the main driving force behind the eviction of the tenant farmers off of their land. The banking system is further critiqued because it is a “monster” that takes over everything it touches. “Monster” rarely has positive connotations associated with it, and, at the time of publication, banks are still viewed with mistrust because they, along with the stock market, were the institutions to fail the American people and set off the Great Depression.

The passage above also incorporates another critique by introducing the idea of the individual and their role as part of society as a whole. The novel condemns the owners for a two-fold reason: they are the agents of the tenant farmers' downfall and they are the supporting pillars of the banking system. The owners refuse to take the blame for the problems the banks have caused; they claim that it is just the bank itself that takes over and controls them, while in reality, they can control the bank, but allow it to function as if it were a separate entity. They are looking for somewhere to lay the blame that is not on them. While they may condemn the institution in which they play a role and how it functions, they still support it by participating.

This critique of both the individual and humankind more generally continues with the juxtaposition of the Joads against the landowners. The Joad family and families in similar predicaments are depicted in very similar ways: “The Joads ‘represent heroic losers, who despite their ignorance and narrowness develop in positive ways’” (Heavilin 302). They are all much kinder, more generous, and more welcoming than those who

have enough money to get through the Great Depression without having to uproot their entire existence. The book ends with an example of this selflessness; the Joads find a starving man in a boxcar in which they are sheltering while a torrential downpour threatens outside. Rose of Sharon, who has recently given birth to a stillborn baby, nurses the man with the milk from her breasts. When Rose of Sharon's mother looks at her, "Ma smiled. 'I knowed you would. I knowed!'" (454). She shares with a man an intimacy that normally only a mother and her baby would share. She has never breastfed anyone before and the person she chooses to share this experience with is far from whom she would be expected to be sharing it with. "The episode [where Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a grown man] represents the novel's most comprehensive thesis, that all life is one and holy, and that every man in Casy's words, 'jus' got a little piece of a great big soul'" (Heavilin 73). The people struggling to get through the Great Depression are also the ones willing to participate in helping those who are also in need.

The last institution to be criticized in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the government itself. The Joads are lucky enough to find a government camp where they are given humane treatment. Jack writes in his review in *The New York Times*, "the Joad family finds only one piece of order and decency in this country of fear and violence, in a government camp, and it is a pleasure to follow the family as they take a shower bath and go to the Saturday night dances (1)." One night Tom looks around and "he saw that the rows were straight and that there was no litter about the tents. The ground of the street had been swept and sprinkled. From the tents came the snores of sleeping people" (288). The camp is clean, sanitary, and provides basic amenities to the people staying there. Unfortunately, there are only a limited amount of spaces in the camp and the Joads are lucky enough to

get one. There are thousands of people in need in the valleys of California and throughout their entire travels cross-country; the Joad family only finds one such place where they can stop and rest. It is not their fault they have to leave their homes and find a new life. The lack of government aid within the book implies that the government should have done more to help its people.

In conclusion, the books within the critique current handle the issues that are prevalent in society and they do it in a way that safeguards the comfort of the reading public. It presents the issues when they are either removed from the present moment, or they couch it in terms that are do not question the status quo of the United States at the time. Ultimately, the books illuminate the issues that exist in the nostalgic books, such as racism and income inequality, but that are often ignored or downplayed. Instead, the critique books take the time to make these problems an intrinsic part of their narrative so their reader is forced to recognize the issues within the United States of America itself and how they affect the citizens of the nation.

### Chapter 3: American Storytelling

In 1968, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron won the Pulitzer Prize. The book does something that has not previously been seen: it tells the stories of both nostalgia and critique and holds them in contention. Thus, the nostalgia category, exemplified in this thesis by *The Age of Innocence* and *Gone with the Wind*, and the critique category, found in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, are brought together in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Here, the battle between nostalgia and critique is fought out between the voices of T.R. Gray, Turner's white, court-appointed lawyer, and Nat Turner, the slave rebellion leader himself. Gray is symbolic of the nostalgic elements of the prize, while Turner represents the critique side. Gray's interpretation of Nat's first-person account maintains the nostalgic element so intrinsic to the Pulitzer Prize. Gray seizes the narrative, and by doing so, diminishes Nat Turner within his own story; Gray represents a yearning for the antebellum social order of the Old South, one Nat Turner, and what he symbolizes, threatens.

William Styron writes a story filtered through another story: that of Turner's first-person confession told through the voice of Gray. Gray begins the novel by explaining that he will read Turner's confession back to him. There are sections of the novel where the reader is unsure if they are hearing Gray's voice or Turner's, making them question whose version of events they are hearing. This confusion is further complicated by the fact that the book is told in first person, but is technically written by a third party, Styron. Through this confusion, the voice of Gray dominates because the reader is reminded that Gray has taken charge of the story, so explicitly explained at the beginning of the novel. Gray says,

Of course, Nat, this ain't supposed to represent your exact words as you said them to me. Naturally, in a court confession there's got to be a kind of, uh, dignity of style, so this here's more or less a reconstitution and *recomposition* of the relative crudity of manner in which all of our various discourses since last Tuesday went. The essence—that is, all the quiddities of detail are the same—or at least I hope they are the same. (30)

This last sentence could be interpreted as Gray's desire to get Turner's story correct, but based on Gray's other actions throughout the novel, Gray only cares about what Turner did during the rebellion, and not why. The motivation, essentially the essence of the Rebellion, is why Turner incited the rebellion in the first place. By refusing to place much emphasis on the motivation, Gray relegates Turner's suffering under slavery to background information. The diminishment of Turner is only exacerbated by Gray's prejudice and his firm belief in Turner's guilt. Even before Turner gets very far into his confession, Gray tells him he will hang. The way Gray situates Turner within his own narrative throws everything Turner says into question so that the reader has no other place to ground their opinion of Turner on other than Gray's interpretation of the story.

The usurpation of Turner's deeply personal story about slavery, injustice, and untold struggle is representative of the nostalgic current of the prize in its white-washing of the real issues at hand. As Mike Thelwell, in his essay "Back with the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner, " writes, "If this book is important, it is not because it tells much about Negro experience during slavery but because of the manner in which it demonstrates the persistence of white southern myths, racial stereotypes, and literary clichés even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds" (Duff & Mitchell 190).

Thelwell believes that the novel does nothing to reveal the suffering under slavery, that it only portrays slavery as an unfortunate circumstance. One of the hidden hallmarks of the nostalgic current is its tendency to ignore important issues and hard-to-face immoralities, just as Gray does with Turner's legitimate reasons for condemning slavery. The nostalgic books yearn for certain social structures, which differ story to story, and tend to ignore everything that does not fit within that framework. Styron negotiates Turner's place within the framework by casting him in a certain light. As Albert Murray writes, "Styron's version is not the Negro's Homeric Negro but a white man's Negro - a Nat Turner who has been emasculated and reduced to fit snugly into a personality structure based on highly questionable and essentially irrelevant conjectures about servility" (Duff & Mitchell 177). Turner has been reduced to someone who could not veritably threaten the social structure that Gray works so hard to maintain throughout the novel. Hence, Gray, and Styron as well, yearn for a world where white supremacy is not questioned, and they refuse to fully acknowledge the negative aspects of slavery; Gray and, subsequently, Styron try to ignore and diminish the harsh reality under which Turner lives.

Turner's marginalization in his own story is only exacerbated by the imposition of white language on him. Nat is a well-educated slave who knows how to speak "white" English correctly, but he still retains some remainder of the slave's dialect, so his English is not considered "pure." For example, Turner will say a completely grammatically correct sentence and then refer to his master by "Marse" instead of "master." In the story, the slaves' dialect is either eradicated completely by the imposition of the voices of Gray and Styron onto Turner, or it is exacerbated, so any "flaws" in Turner's English are

shown in sharp contrast to the speech of a white character. Stewart writes in “William Turnergraystyron. Novelist(s): Reactivating State Power in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,” “Turner’s confession *does* operate under a white language and consciousness, both that of Gray in the historical “Confessions” and that of Styron, who re-enacts the role of Gray with his novel” (174). In this regard, the voice of criticism, Turner’s, is covered by not one, but two, voices of nostalgia, making it even harder for the critique side to be recognized. This telling of an African American story through the eyes of a white narrator offended many African American academics and provided the impetus a group to write *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. The book contains many different arguments, summarized here:

Whether knowingly or unconsciously, Styron has written a story the tone and explicit content of which have the side effect of degrading and emasculating Nat Turner and casting doubts upon the moral legitimacy of the revolt he led; the novel represents a serious misreading of history and folklore, which has occurred under pressure from persistent (if not always recognized) white myths and stereotypes; finally, the book’s popular and critical success confirms the deepest of divisions within American society - the chasm between the black and white cultures. (Stone 32)

These academics also specifically take issue with the language that Nat Turner uses throughout the novel. Turner is forced into a no-man’s land between the language of the white slave owners and that of the slaves. “Turner’s parroting of the black dialect he needs to reach the slaves is not unlike his mimicry of the white dialect that holds him above the other blacks in the novel” (Stewart 178). Therefore, Turner has no language of



his own and there is no other person in the story who shares this middle ground of language with him. “Mr. Styron’s Nat speaks, or rather mediates in no language at all” (Duff & Mitchell 182). He is rendered truly voiceless and alone. Furthermore, Eliot Freemont-Smith of *The New York Times Book Review* writes, “Turner speaks in dialect. But he thinks, recalls, recounts in a voice that many readers will think can only be Mr. Styron’s, it is so cultivated, literate, sensitive and modern.” It attributes any intelligence that Turner may have entirely to Styron and Gray, once again reducing the impact the voice of critique is allowed. It is hard to be heard and taken seriously when one’s entire intelligence is called into question.

Styron’s telling of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and Gray’s voice therein, forces nostalgic elements into the story of the slave rebellion. One of the hallmarks of the nostalgic books is their reliance on romantic relationships to do the moralizing in the story. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* often highlights Turner’s loneliness and his need for company and companionship. In addition to the isolation in his language, Turner is further isolated because he looks down on the slave population, thus cutting himself off from the people with whom he is allowed to form relationships. The book shows his loneliness through increasingly violent romantic and sexual urges until they finally condense into rape fantasies of young white women. Styron plays into the stereotypes of his day and he himself says, “I might also say now that I had ‘perpetuated’ the stereotype of the black man’s hang-up on white females because I feel it was—quite probably—true” (Duff & Mitchell 201). In the novel, these sexual and romantic urges are physically manifested when Turner commits his only murder of the whole Rebellion. He forms a friendship with Margaret Whitehead, a young white woman, who “didn’t mind being

seen in her pantaloons by her friend, Nat Turner; why be more modest in front of him than in front of any other animal?" (Freemont-Smith). Their relationship goes beyond the normal bounds of a slave-owner relationship and moves into friendship. Nat feels uncomfortable by their closeness at points throughout the novel and he questions the feelings he has for her. He says,

It is *not* hatred; it is something else. But what? What? I cannot place the emotion . It is closer to jealousy, but it is not even that. And why I should feel such a angry turmoil over this gentle creature baffles me, for ... she is the only white person with whom I have experienced one moment of a warm and mysterious and mutual confluence of sympathy (92).

He feels affection, but then also feels anger that he lives in such a confined world where he will never be able to act on his feelings. Margaret symbolizes Turner's frustration and anger with slavery because she essentially leads him to believe and hope they could be and have something more than society would ever allow. Their friendship is nothing more than a source of constant frustration and anger for Turner.

Turner regrets nothing about the Rebellion, except for one thing: his murder of Margaret. He says, "No, Mr. Gray, I have no remorse for anything. I would do it all again ... I would destroy them all again, all-But for one..." (Styron 403). During the rebellion, Margaret is the only person Turner personally kills; he is not able to kill anyone else that he does not have this deeper, personal connection with. Margaret is a physical representation of all of the restraints placed on Turner by the institution of slavery. When Margaret enters the library where Turner is one day, just in her pantalets, Turner says,

I look up I in a quick furtive glance from the ragged bandage I am

pressing against my hand, catch sight of the pantalettes again, turn my eyes away. I sweat. A vein pulses at my temple. I feel split upon a sudden and savage rage. How could she with this thoughtlessness and innocence provoke me so? Godless white bitch. (339)

Here it is not immediately obvious what Turner's personal feelings for Margaret are, but it seems that he is angry with her for being attractive and that he is angry at himself for being attracted to her. Furthermore, because of the narrative structure of the novel previously explained, the reader does not know if these are Turner's true feelings or Gray's interpretation of them from Turner's confession.

The book then goes on to describe the murder of Margaret and how Turner feels compelled to do it. In addition to the reasoning explained above, without murdering at least one person, he would not be able to retain the leadership of the rebellion; he would lose it to the bloodthirsty Will. However, Margaret's murder is described as an act of mercy. The scene progresses from anger and lust to pity and remorse quickly. As Margaret runs away from the approaching Turner, he thinks, "Ah, how I want her" (413). When she tries to climb over the fence to get away from him, "she tripped forward, bare arms still outthrust as if to welcome someone beloved and long-unseen" (413). Turner then catches up to her and stabs her with his sword, but as that does not kill her, Margaret pleads for mercy: "Oh Nat please kill me I hurt so" (414). Turner grants her the mercy of a quick death. He cannot bear to see her suffer. If he did not ultimately have these feelings for her, he would have been able to let her suffer for longer. He goes on to say, "'shut your eyes' ... Then when I raised the rail above her head she gazed at me, as if past the imponderable vista of her anguish, with a grave and drowsy tenderness such as I had

never known, spoke some words too soft to hear and, saying no more, closed her eyes upon all madness, illusion, error, dream, and strife” (414). He cannot allow her to look on him as he kills her. After she is dead, he throws “the hateful, shattered club far up into the weeds” (414). The instrument of Margaret’s death is now the thing he hates, whereas earlier he had yearned for her demise and actively pursued that goal. The retelling of the scene effectively strips Turner of his anger at Margaret for making his situation that much more painful and replaces it with love and mourning: “I arose again and resumed my meaningless and ordained circuit of her body, not near it yet ever within sight as if that crumpled blue were the center of an orbit around whose path I must make a ceaseless pilgrimage” (415). He circles Margaret’s dead body for hours, unable to leave her alone for even a minute. This passage serves to reinforce Turner’s love for Margaret. The reader can sense the regret caused by her death. However, as mentioned earlier, Margaret is the only person Turner is able to kill because she combines two strong feelings, hatred and love, in one person. Turner hates her because she is white and belongs to the ranks of people who make his life a living nightmare, and because she transgresses the societal conventions that bind slave-owner relationships, but he also loves her because she is nice, kind, and willing to befriend him. The tension between these two feelings is violent enough to allow the Turner’s inner turmoil to be unleashed and turned on Margaret in the form of her death.

While the relationship between Margaret and Turner is not the same type of romantic love story that exists in other Pulitzer novels, it is still one of the most poignant parts of the plot. In the few pages before Nat meets his fate, he thinks about Margaret and refers to love multiple times in the passage: “Beloved, let us love one another; for love is

of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God” and “I pour out my love within her” (Styron 426). The love that Nat Turner feels for Margaret Whitehead is evident and enduring up until the time of his death.

The same nostalgic voice that supports the romance plot also supports the status quo. The nostalgic voice of Gray espouses white supremacist, antebellum ideas about African American intelligence and their ability to govern themselves. These are the same ideas from *Gone with the Wind* and other Pulitzer Prize-winning novels. Styron writes, “the Negro lags so far behind the rest of us—I mean, the white race—in *moral* development that, well for his own welfare, it might be best that he—well, be kept in a kind of benevolent subjection” (Styron 163). This is in sharp contrast to Turner, who believes that the slaves would be much better off without slavery, hence the whole reasoning behind the rebellion. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, “no matter how intelligent Turner is allowed to appear, the larger social apparatus which contains him (whether slavery or the narrative) ensures that his individual capabilities cannot supersede institutional power” (Stewart 174). The voice of Gray/Styron does not allow Turner to succeed without the superstructure of slavery to keep him in check: “a darky is an animal with the brain of a human child and his only value is the work you can get out of him by intimidation, cajolery, and threat” (Styron 161). The story refuses to see the slaves as fully functioning humans. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is not the only novel that has deeply embedded racial prejudices within the Pulitzer narrative. As mentioned earlier, *Andersonville* by Mackinlay Kantor and *Gone with the Wind* often echo very similar statements, constantly calling the intelligence and ability of the slaves into question. While there is sometimes a sense of fondness for the slaves, even that fondness cannot hide the prejudice.

The nostalgic voice also encourages the use of strict social orders as a way of organizing the narrative and Turner threatens the stability of that social order. The nostalgic voice, and the demeaning views it holds, as well as the strict social structure it supports, is imperiled by the slave rebellion. Turner views himself on the same level as the whites around him, but the whites will never allow Turner that equality. Turner believes himself above much of the slave population and some of the white population, such as “white trash” families. He is prejudiced against many of the slaves for their childishness, hygiene, and their lack of intelligence. Turner says, “For one thing alone (and this in spite of all Marse Samuel’s efforts to teach a fundamental cleanliness) there was the odor—the stink of sweat and grease and piss and nigger offal, of rancid pork and crotch and armpit and black toil and straw ticks stained with babies’ vomit—an abyssal odor of human defeat revolting and irredeemable” (Styron 184). This description leads back to Nat’s belief in his inherent superiority to the other slaves. His mother impresses upon him that house slaves are miles above the field hands in the social order of the slaves. This continues to build until Turner sees himself as a person completely apart from the slave community. “For even now as a child I am contemptuous and aloof, filled with disdain for the black riffraff which dwells beyond the close perimeter of the big house” (136). He looks down on their childish actions and believes himself to be better.

[Nat] became a discriminating connoisseur of Sambo types, those given to ‘wallowing in the dust at the slightest provocation, midriffs clutched in idiot laughter,’ those who ‘endear themselves to all, white and black, through droll and interminable tales about ha’nts and witches and conjures,’ and at all the other extreme those who ‘reverse this procedure

and in *their* niggerness are able to outdo many white people in presenting to the world a grotesque swagger.’ (171)

Turner sees anyone who puts on this act as below him in station and as lacking the self-respect that any human should have.

Turner questions and challenges the social order the whites have where all blacks are lower than whites, no matter their station. Turner sees the social hierarchy with field hands at the bottom, white trash next and then house slaves and the slave owners towards the top. But members of Southern “white trash” class would not agree with Turner’s hierarchy based upon their ideas of white supremacy. Gray squashes Turner’s rebellion against the social order by repeatedly reminding the reader that Turner can never transcend the bounds of slavery. When Turner works for the Moores, a family he considers “white trash,” he is at his lowest of lows, as he is forced to work for people he considers himself better than. The Moores have no education at all, they hit him, and they are more brutal than any master he has had before. “‘Say *master!*’ Moore roared. ‘Mastah!’ I cried in terror. ‘Mastah! Mastah! *Mastah!*’” (252). He is forced to be subservient to men he has no respect for. *Gone with the Wind* also echoes this view of “white trash”: “The house negroes of the County considered themselves superior to white trash” (67). The slaves from both books also have a strict social hierarchy within their own communities and Nat has placed himself at the top of the hierarchy; if he were to encounter Bob Ewell and his family from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, then he would most likely look down his nose at them the same way the slaves in *Gone with the Wind* would.

The mismatch between Turner’s hierarchy and Gray’s hierarchy is another place where *The Confessions of Nat Turner* attempts to highlight the tension between nostalgia

and critique. Here, the representative voices of those two currents are coming directly into conflict with each other over their worldviews. The novel uses its form to create tension between the voices and, in turn, between the two main currents of nostalgia and critique within the Pulitzer Prize itself.

The tension is never more evident than when Turner's voice, that of critique, begins fighting back against Gray's, highlighting the mistreatments Turner receives at the hands of the Southern social order. These moments occur when Turner is sold to the Moores and throughout many of his interactions with Margaret and the rest of the Whitehead family. The way the story is structured also allows Styron and Gray to focus on the ease with which the slave rebellion is defeated, instead of why the rebellion needed to happen in the first place. There are only about three days where the slaves revolt and they kill, in sum total, about 60 people. "In the three days and nights that your campaign lasted you managed to hasten fifty-five white people into early graves," Gray tells Turner at the end of the book while trying to get some remorse from him (394). There is a very slim chance that Nat will show this remorse, however. Over 100 uninvolved slaves were killed in response to the Rebellion: "The horror of lawless retaliation and reprisal -- one hundred and thirty-one innocent niggers both slave and free cut down by the mob that roamed Southampton for a solid week, searching vengeance" (113). However, this fact is only briefly mentioned by Grey and is barely noted by Turner himself. It is also mentioned nowhere near its chronological place in time, removing the importance even further from the statement. This number also does not include those who participated in the rebellion itself, most of whom are killed anyway. This emphasis on the defeat of the slave rebellion and the brutal retaliation by the white population is a very telling piece of the story. *The*



*Confession of Nat Turner* wins the prize in 1968, right when the Civil Rights Movement comes to an end with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the passing of the 1968 Civil Rights Act by President Johnson. Most of the movement's major events occurred in the late 50s and early 60s. By emphasizing the ease with which the rebellion is quashed, the book sets out to reassure its readers that the status quo will remain in place. The rebellion of 1831 might have seemed to some readers reminiscent of the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s. "The racial unrest of the mid-1960s adds further resonance to the cautionary cast of the novel for those blacks agitating to revolutionize the racial dispensation of American society" (Stewart 172). In addition to serving as a warning for the future of the status quo, the novel points out what can happen to those who are unhappy with the status quo and wish to see it changed. Furthermore, Nat Turner has "been manifestly defeated and his defeat is exhibited for all—whites and blacks of both 1831 and 1967—to see" (Stewart 173). The book can be seen as a way of comforting the white public that no matter how "uppity" the African American population may get, they can never truly win. "Styron had managed to express the paradox implicit in contemporary Negro violence as well: understandable though it might be, violence was counter-productive, ending as it did in further suffering for blacks" (Stuckey 221). The way the novel feeds into the fear of some of the prize's audience might hold also interacts with the idea of popularity so pervasive throughout the history of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The novels awarded the prize tend to include ideas that were pervasive in popular culture and the possibility that the Civil Rights Movement could upset the status quo and threaten the current social structure was on the minds of some. The topics the novels deal with, however, have to be pervasive enough that a large enough portion of the public will

want to read books about them.

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* pulls in themes from another very popular Pulitzer Prize winning novel: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both African American men in the two books end up at the mercy of the judicial system and both are essentially voiceless and powerless in the face of that great American institution: the Judicial System. Just as Tom Robinson's fate is decided before he even steps foot in that courtroom, so is Nat Turner's. René Girard writes in *The Scapegoat*, "Admittedly, the victim is condemned in advance; he cannot defend himself, his trial has already taken place, but at least there is a trial no matter how prejudiced" (Stewart 173). The gross difference between *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* lies in the defenses. Tom Robinson has Atticus Finch on his side who portrays Tom's story with the utmost truth and lack of prejudice. Throughout the entirety of Atticus's argument and closing statement to the jury, one can sense the truth to the story and to the way in which Tom is portrayed. Because Atticus believes Tom's story, Scout, and in turn, the reader, all believe his story. Nat Turner has no Atticus Finch on his side; instead he has T.R. Gray, a lawyer who admits to changing Turner's testimony. Gray also believes Turner will be hanged no matter what. Very early on in the novel Gray tells Turner, "'That's how the law provides that animate chattel like you can be tried for a felony, and that's how come you're goin' to be tried next Sattidy.' He paused, then said softly without emotion: 'And hung by the neck until dead'" (22). Within moments of being given a lawyer to defend him, Gray tells Nat Turner his case will without a doubt be lost. In court, Gray demeans the entire African American population and makes it very obvious that he believes that Turner is guilty and deserves the death sentence: "On the other [hand] the aimless and pathetic and

futile slaughter of Nat Turner [was] destined from its inception to utter failure because of the biological and spiritual inferiority of the Negro character!” (Styron 95). Despite what is being said, the voice of critique fights back against the voice of nostalgia by showing the unfairness with which Turner is represented in court. Despite Gray and his domination of the narrative, the wrongness of the way the trial is conducted comes through; all the prejudice and lack of “innocent until proven guilty” is sharply shown. For Nat, there is no belief in his confession; all of his words have been twisted by Gray to fit the agenda of a Southern town in the middle of the 1830s, mainly to hang him. One can assume that if Atticus Finch were Turner’s defense attorney, the trial would have a different outcome. Ultimately, the Justice System and the courts disappoint the two African American men put on trial. Both Tom Robinson and Nat Turner end up in the same place: dead.

Furthermore, both *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *The Grapes of Wrath* present the consequences of trying to change the status quo. There are very clearly punishments for starting a rebellion or movement to challenge the established social order. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* ends with Turner’s resignation to his and Hark’s hanging. Nat watches Hark go to his death like “some marvelous black potentate borne in stately procession toward his throne” because he is so injured he can be carried no other way than on a chair (Styron 427). The imagery is powerful because Hark appears strong and mighty, but he is, in reality, a wrecked man. Then Nat turns his attention back to himself and he says, “I turn in surrender. Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Oh how bright and fair the morning star” (Styron 428). Turner is ready to die now that he has lost both everyone he has the slightest ties to and the reason for living: his

rebellion. It is possible to read Nat Turner as a martyr who dies fighting for the freedom of his people. “The Nat Turner who nourished the hopes of Negroes is a tragic hero symbolizing the human spirit victorious in defeat” (Duff & Mitchell 177). This legacy of martyrdom, however, is hidden under the guise of terrorism. In the eyes of the public of 1831, Turner will always be seen as in the wrong no matter how noble his reasons for his actions are. Although he was fighting back against the unjust and brutal system of slavery, he still instigated and committed acts that are seen as unforgivable.

Turner is not the only character in the Pulitzer canon that can be read as a martyr, and in turn, as a voice of critique. Jim Casy, the preacher from *The Grapes of Wrath*, also dies inciting a protest against the unfair treatment of the workers in California during the Great Depression. Casy helps to organize a group of men to protest the absurdly low wages. The men trying to end the protests accuse Casy and his friends of being communists and Casy stands up them, saying, “You fellas don’ know what you’re doin’. You’re helpin’ to starve kids.” He is responded to brutally with a “shut up, you red son-of-a-bitch” and the swing of a pick ax by one of the aggressors. “The heavy club crashed into the side of his head with a dull crunch of bone, and Casy fell sideways out of the light.... The flashlight beam dropped, searched and found Casy’s crushed head” (Steinbeck 386). Casy dies trying to get children enough food to eat and Turner dies trying to end slavery. Both men give up their lives defending a cause they believe in. Although the goals and the outcomes of what they were working toward differ widely, in the end, they are both killed because they believe people should be given civil liberties that are not being granted at the time. Unfortunately, others do not share these ideas and think they are too much of a threat to the social structure in which they are flourishing

and in which men like Casy and Turner are being taken advantage of. It is the people who are being suppressed and disenchanted who see a reason to change the society in which they live; the people who were benefitting, like Gray and the men running the farms in California, who do not see any need to change the status quo and who are determined to keep anything from shifting. Turner and Casy are ultimately killed because of their unpopular ideas on the social structures under which they live, and those ideas threaten the stability of the world that the voices of nostalgia want to keep intact.

The critique of normally nostalgic elements continues through another string that threads its way throughout the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction: religion. But instead of the moralizing that religion normally serves to reinforce in the nostalgic novels, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *The Grapes of Wrath* question the idea of religion as a moral compass. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Turner believes that the signs from God are what tell him to massacre the entire white population of Southampton County. The Christian religion advises against murder and normally God is not the one advising the killing of many people. Once Nat Turner is captured, he feels that he can no longer pray and that God is no longer listening. Even when Gray brings him a Bible, he still feels disconnected from the religion that provides the impetus for the Rebellion itself. Turner doesn't even believe that God is there for his people at all. He says, "It seemed rather that my black shit-eating people were surely like flies, God's mindless outcasts, lacking even that will to destroy by their own hand their unending anguish" (27). For Turner, it is hard to believe in his vision or calling for so long when he feels as though he's been abandoned by his guiding light, who, in this case, is God and religion.

Casy also questions God and his ability to hear him. At the beginning of *The Grapes*

*of Wrath*, Casy struggles with religion. The struggles they endure during the Great Depression make the existence of God and religion a hard concept to maintain. When Tom Joad first meets Casy, Casy introduces himself as, “Reverend Jim Casy - was a Burning Busher... But not no more. Just Jim Casey now. Ain’t got the call no more. Got a lot of sinful idears-but they seem kinda sensible” (Steinbeck 20). Casy turns away from religion because it is not giving him the answers he seeks. He has to face the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression on his own, with no help from a Divine Power.

Again, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is representative of what the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction does as an institution. The voices of nostalgia, as symbolized by Gray, and of critique, as symbolized by Turner, coalesce in the novel. These voices have typically been kept apart throughout the prize’s history up until this point and, in 1968, when this book is awarded the prize, they finally come head to head and the tensions between them create the mixture of nostalgic and critical elements within the story. The nostalgic elements are interested in maintaining a sense of morality and in keeping the society represented intact with all of its social conventions. Gray tries to enforce these ideals on Turner’s narrative, while Turner tries to get the reader to understand and listen to his critique of the society he lives under, one that is based off of the horrors of slavery.

## Conclusion

The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was established in 1917, right as the United States of America entered World War I determined to show the rest of the world the might of the New World. The prize parallels the nation's growth into a superpower, beginning with stories that highlight the American myths proven as a draw to immigrants thinking about moving to the new country for two centuries, before it moves into books that examine the cultures that had risen out of this original melting pot. The prizewinning books follow the United States through its travails in World War I, to its hardships during the Great Depression, to World War II where the US uses its firmly established position as a world superpower to help end an international crisis. With this establishment on the world stage, the novels awarded the Pulitzer Prize no longer had to rely on the American myths, but could begin to look at American culture and the problems therein. In the late 50s and 60s, the nation was in turmoil as the Civil Rights Movement, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War, among other events, shifted the bedrock of the American nation. The books awarded the prize during these turbulent years reflect the changes and problems the nation as a whole was facing. The political turmoil came through in *Advise and Consent* (1960) while the Civil Rights Movement was expressed in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

Ultimately, The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction has, throughout its first 50 years, shown its reading audience two different stories of the United States in the form of nostalgia and critique. For most of those 50 years, these two currents are held apart from each other. However, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the prize, they come together in *The Confessions of*

*Nat Turner*. This suggests that, as time progresses, more books that deal directly with this tension will be awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Based on my preliminary research on the books awarded, this has held true. The books awarded the prize begin to include increasingly diverse perspectives and writing styles. Notable winners include *Beloved* (1988) by Toni Morrison, about the ghost of an African American child who haunts her mother; *American Pastoral* (1998) by Philip Roth, also a fellow Bucknellian, who writes about a life ruined by the political atmosphere of the 1960s; and the 2016 Pulitzer Prize recipient *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen, which tells the story of a political prisoner divided between his sympathies for the United States, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam in 1975. All of these choices point to the prize's evolution from a conservative prize ruled by strict criteria to one where a book with an intersex main character, or a man who shows female traits (*Middlesex* 2003), can win the prize. A book that deals with such a topic would have been unimaginable among the early prizewinners.

Although the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction tended, in its early years, to avoid controversial issues until they were presented in the correct packaging, there is also a gesture toward its growth as an institution, as seen in the stories that were chosen toward the end of its first fifty years. That the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction can expand its outlook as a prize-giving entity and still remain such an important institution within the American literary up until 1968 world bodes well for the future of the prize. The evolution of the prize also points to the evolution of the American public as one that is willing to engage with and read about more complex, societal issues and that is amenable to seeing more diverse perspectives put forward by the prize. Especially in light of the political climate in 2017, it is important to have institutions that are willing to recognize, and award,



literature that addresses issues of importance to the United States of America. It is imperative that the Pulitzer and other prestigious literary works like it acknowledge the myriad of experiences that occur within the United States of America and that push back against the ideology that is stemming from a Trump-dominated White House.

The Pulitzer Prize has the ability to do this, all while keeping the currents that endured throughout the first fifty years of the prize. Nostalgia and critique both play an important role in telling the story of the nation, as nostalgia allows us to remember the past and critique enables us to imagine a future that better.

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## Appendix: List of Pulitzer Prizewinners 1918-1968<sup>2</sup>

- 1918- *His Family* by Ernest Poole
- 1919- *The Magnificent Ambersons* by Booth Tarkington
- 1921- *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton**
- 1922- *Alice Adams* by Booth Tarkington
- 1923- *One of Ours* by Willa Cather
- 1924- *The Able McLaughlins* by Margaret Wilson
- 1925- *So Big* by Edna Ferber
- 1926- *Arrowsmith* by Sinclair Lewis
- 1927- *Early Autumn* by Louis Bromfield
- 1928- *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* by Thornton Wilder
- 1929- *Scarlet Sister Mary* by Julia Peterkin
- 1930- *Laughing Boy* by Oliver LaFarge
- 1931- *Years of Grace* by Margaret Ayers Barnes
- 1932- *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck
- 1933- *The Store* by T.S. Stribling
- 1934- *Lamb in His Bosom* by Caroline Miller
- 1935- *Now in November* by Josephine Winslow Johnson
- 1936- *Honey in the Horn* by Harold L. Davis
- 1937- *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell**
- 1938- *The Late George Apley* by John Phillips Marquand
- 1939- *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings
- 1940- *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck**
- 1942- *In this Our Life* by Ellen Glasgow
- 1943- *Dragon's Teeth* by Upton Sinclair
- 1944- *Journey in the Dark* by Martin Flavin
- 1945- *A Bell for Adano* by John Hersey
- 1947- *All the King's Men* by Robert Penn Warren
- 1948- *Tales of the South Pacific* by James A Michener

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<sup>2</sup> Bolded books are the main focus of this thesis

- 1949- *Guard of Honor* by James Gould Cozzens
- 1950- *The Way West* by A. B. Guthrie
- 1951- *The Town* by Conrad Richter
- 1952- *The Caine Munity* by Herman Wouk
- 1953- *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway
- 1955- *A Fable* by William Faulkner
- 1956- *Andersonville* by MacKinlay Kantor
- 1958- *A Death in the Family* by James Agee
- 1959- *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters* by Robert Lewis Taylor
- 1960- *Advise and Consent* by Allen Drury
- 1961- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee**
- 1962- *The Edge of Sadness* by Edwin O'Connor
- 1963- *The Reivers* by William Faulkner
- 1965- *The Keepers of the House* by Shirley Anne Grau
- 1966- *Collected Stories* by Katherine Anne Porter
- 1967- *The Fixer* by Bernard Malamud
- 1968- *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron**